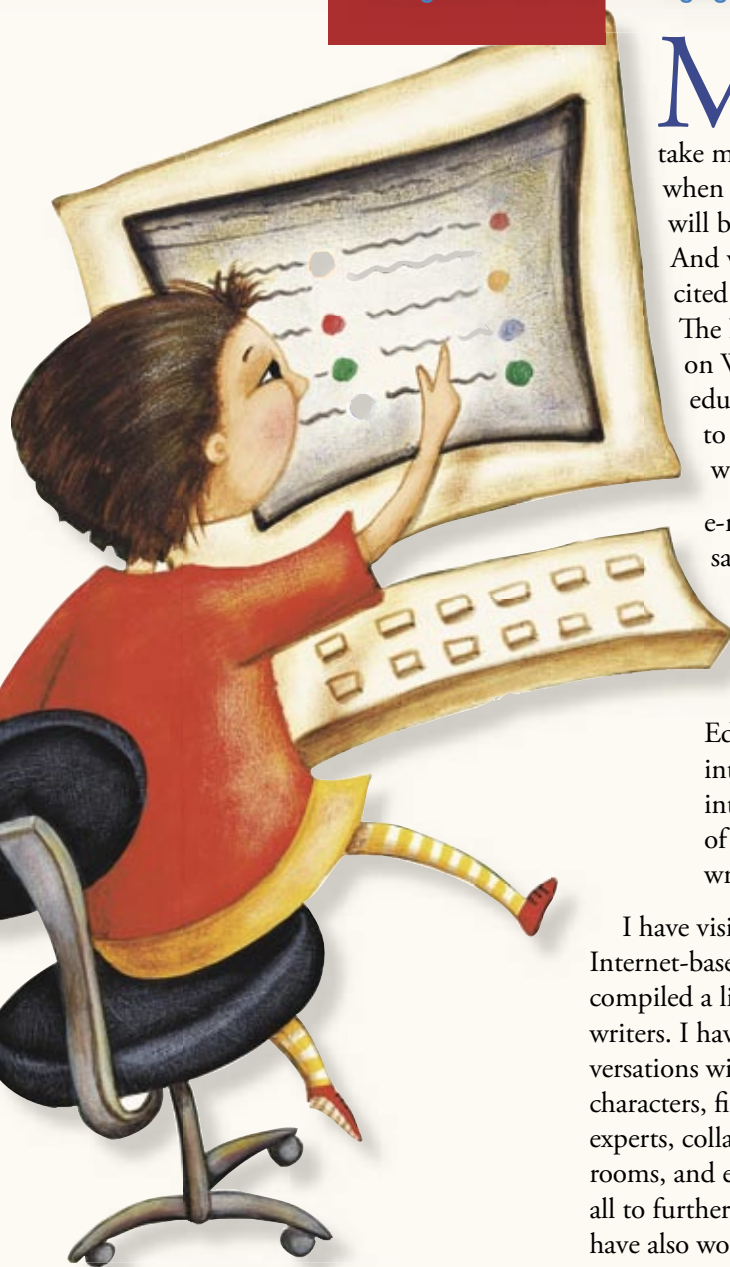


The Write Motivation

Using the Internet to Engage Students in Writing across the Curriculum



By Dennis Rowen

Subject: Writing

Grades: K-5 (Ages 5-10)

Technology: Word processing software, e-mail, Internet

Standards: NETS-S 3, 4; NETS-T II
(<http://www.iste.org/standards/>)

Motivating students to write can be difficult. We know that they take more care in their writing when they know their writing will be on display for all to see. And we know they are very excited about using the Internet. The National Commission on Writing recommends that educators use this excitement to motivate students to write:

e-mail, instant messaging, and electronic conferencing provide writers with an immediate and much larger audience.

Educators need to tap into students' inherent interest in these methods of creating and sharing writing.

I have visited many Web sites and Internet-based writing projects and compiled a list of the best for young writers. I have used the Web for conversations with book authors and characters, finding and contacting experts, collaborating with other classrooms, and even acting as an alter-ego, all to further my students' writing. I have also worked with my graduate students to help them integrate technology into their instruction.

Converse with an Author/Character

One of the most exciting ways I have found to get students to write on the Internet is to have them contact an author or book character. The Scholastic Web site is a great place to start. (*Editor's note:* For this and other URLs, see Resources on p. 43.)

The Clifford section of the site is one of the cutest sites for young readers and writers. Students can actually read a Clifford book and then write to the main characters and receive an immediate response. Granted this is a canned program, but younger students buy into it. This site provides opportunities for reading and writing that children relish. The site is also very easy to use. Young children can either read the stories or have the stories read to them, and the interactive writing sections have loads of pictures that help students make choices.

Another section of the Scholastic site allows students to write their own mystery, myth, folktale, or poem. For example, if your students are writing poetry and you want to provide publishing opportunities and guided poetry writing, go to the Writing with Writers: Poetry page. Have students go through the poetry writing process with one of the poets and then submit their poems. Scholastic will not publish all the poems submitted, but they do select many for their site. Another way to publish the poems online would be to post them on the school Web site. On this site, you can guarantee no rejections (except for something deemed inappropriate)!

Kidscribe is another publishing venue to try. It offers a place for students to author and publish their stories, thoughts, poetry, and jokes. Students write or paste their submissions into the designated box, and they are published in a few days. The site publishes in English and/or Spanish.

Once students become hooked on an author, it is always rewarding to do an author study with the students. You can have your class read different works from that particular author.

It is often possible to hook up with an author online. Some authors will respond to student e-mail. If a lot of your students are writing to the same author, it would be wise to group the e-mail messages into one document to make it easier for the author to organize his or her responses.

Scholastic has a stable of authors to contact, including R.L. Stine, Ann Martin, and Dav Pilkey. The Web site offers students activities based on these authors' books.

The Captain Underpants lovers in your classes write their own four-page comic books and e-mail them to friends. Students get to pick the characters, setting, props, and dialogue from a pull-down menu. The site personalizes the story for the names and location you enter.

Another place to access and contact authors is The Children's Literature Web Guide. Some of the authors accessed here include Judy Blume, Jan Brett, and Robert Munsch.

Contact the Experts

Another fantastic way to motivate students to write using the Internet is to have students contact an expert in that field.

I recently completed a unit with my fourth graders centered on the Iroquois of New York. They read about the Iroquois, wrote about them, built longhouses, and participated in an interactive choose your own adventure complete with Native American writings and legends. Many questions came up in this unit. I was able to contact Karen Crow, one of the curators from the now-closed Iroquois Museum near Syracuse, New York, and who is of Iroquois descent. She agreed to receive e-mail from all of the students and then reply to them. Crow took the time to help the students understand the Iroquois world past and present. She answered questions such as, "Do you still fight the Algonquins?" "Do you still live in

a longhouse?" "Do you still travel by canoe?" It may take a little ingenuity and perseverance to find the right connection for your students, but it is a great way to bring subject matter to life.

For teachers exploring planets and specifically life on other planets, check out The NASA Quest site, which brings NASA experts and events right into your classroom. Three venues are available:

1. Participate in a NASA event. The event is a simultaneous Webcast or forum and chat session. Students can submit questions to a NASA expert and see their answers posted online. For example, students can chat with a NASA scientist regarding possible life on Mars.
2. Ask an expert. Students can ask questions about marine biology and weather, volcanoes, earthquakes, astronomy, physics, and so on. They can converse with a "hurricane hunter" or seismologist. They can also access a seismic monitor and see what earthquakes are happening at that moment throughout the world.
3. Students can also enroll in one of the challenges, such as the Robot Helper Design Challenge. This challenge offers excellent writing prompts to help students design a robot, such as "What should your robot buddy look like?" "How will you talk to it?" "What could it do for you?"

Other content area that you can explore are The Journey North, where students track animal and insect migration and plant life cycles, and Insect Safari, where they can study insects in depth.

Collaborate with Other Classrooms

Elizabeth Pinter, a student in one of my graduate courses, designed an exciting unit to motivate student writing in the second grade. Ms.

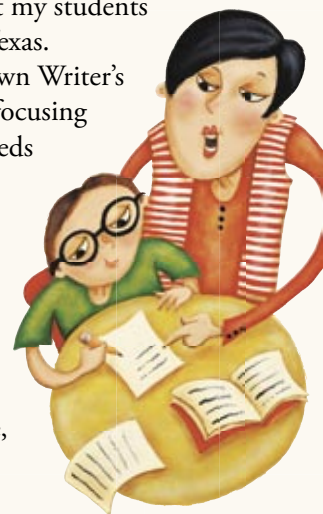
Pinter's class was working on an integrated thematic unit focusing on monsters. Using ePALS, her class connected with a class in the United Kingdom for a joint writing project. The students had to design, in writing, a unique monster. The students would then send this description to their e-pals in the other country, and those students would have to draw the monster described. Students then scanned their drawings and sent them to the creators of the monsters.

The students and the teachers all bonded. They converse on a regular basis. The students wrote and analyzed various topics with their e-pals such as: weather, spelling, and language. The students in each class maintained weather data and were able to compare the weather differences in each country. The discussions also led to map studies and a focus on directions for each class to discover where their pals lived and how they would get there. The U.S. students were quite fascinated with the different word spellings such as honour, flavour, and labour. Some of the students also wrote detailing their ethnicity. This would be a nice opening for any discussion on cultural diversity.

Ms. Pinter's unit inspired me to sign up for the Monster Exchange and use it with my second graders. I was able to connect my students with a student in Texas.

I designed my own Writer's Workshop lessons focusing on my students' needs as writers. I found that the most important aspect was our brainstorming about monsters. I had them name monster parts they could describe, things they could wear, and things

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Dear Connie:

I have made a monster and I would like it if you would make it with the details I have given. My monster is wearing black pants. He has a black tee-shirt with fire and skull and X bones. He has red skin. He has short red horns. He also has mean looking eye brows. He has yellow teeth. He has a tail and pitchfork. He is standing on a rock. There is fire in front of the rock.

From, Jennifer



Jennifer (from Pinter's class in the United States) sent Connie (from the cooperating class in the United Kingdom) a description of the monster she had created. Connie sent back this drawing based on Jennifer's description.

Writing from p. 23.

they could be made from. This really helped the students who tend to write only one or two sentences to expand their writing.

I was also able to work on getting the students to write complete sentences. These students had a tendency to write one very long sentence. To help them edit their writing for this, I modeled the editing process. I put up a description from another class and demonstrated where to put periods. After the students had written their first draft, they had to go back and check it to see where each of their thoughts ended and then add periods. I then had each student buddy up with another student for some peer editing. Again, this was a focused editing process, as they were only looking for complete sentences. After they completed the peer editing process, I reviewed all descriptions before posting them on the monster Web site.

Create Your Own Alter-Ego

When I work with students in the classroom, I use many of my own books and materials. *Mini-Mini-Micro-Man and the Electric Adventure* teaches fourth graders about the principles of electricity and helps prepare

them for the New York State fourth grade language arts and science tests. Mini-Mini-Micro-Man is a computer genius who has completed college at the age of two. He designs a computer that enables him to do many fantastic things, including change crossing lights, start and stop elevators, talk with Neil Armstrong, and change himself into an electron. I set up a T-Chart for students to write down what they feel is fact and fiction in the book. I then tell the students that Mini-Mini-Micro-Man is a real person. Of course, they doubt this. To prove he exists, Mini-Mini-Micro-Man gives his e-mail address in the book (a Hotmail account I monitor and respond to). The discussions my students have with Mini-Mini-Micro-Man online are amazing. Student inquiries include: "What does it feel like to be an electron?" "Can you come to our school and show us your stuff?" "How do you start and stop the elevator?" "Where can you go as an electron?" "How can you be real? Send me a picture of yourself."

These fourth graders needed help with their writing mechanics. We worked on capitals at the beginning of sentences, capitals for proper nouns, and periods. To help with

this process, we had the students go through a peer editing process. Then, I would check over their writing for these highlighted mechanics.

Conclusion

Web sites and e-mail offer many ways to motivate students to write. When students know someone other than me will see their writing, it becomes easy to help them with process and mechanics. They take pride in their work, and they make it look good.

I found that my students were more receptive to the revision process than previous students. They were eager to participate in peer editing and did not resist my editing. The best part of these projects was that the students carried their motivation and willingness to edit to their other writing projects.

This combination of a highly motivational and meaningful activity helped make teaching writing an enjoyable and meaningful experience.

Resources

The Children's Literature Web Guide:
<http://www.acs.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/authors.html>
 Clifford: <http://www.scholastic.com/clifford/>
 ePALS: <http://www.epals.com>
 Insect Safari: <http://www.orkin.com/learning-center/kidsandteachers.asp>
 The Journey North: <http://www.learner.org/jnorth/>
 Kidscribe: <http://web2.airmail.net/def/>
 Monster Exchange: <http://www.monsterexchange.org>
 National Commission on Writing: http://www.writingcommission.org/prod_downloads/writingcom/neglectedr.pdf
 Scholastic: <http://www.scholastic.com>
 Writing with Writers: Poetry: <http://teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/poetry/>



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